

Neutrality in Crisis: The Changing Role of the Red Cross and the Governance of Humanitarian Action

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Abstract

The Red Cross organization plays a vital part in IHL development through its protection and assistance provision for war victims regardless of their national background or political status or military service. Since its establishment the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) functions as an independent humanitarian organization which preserves neutrality during conflicts. The humanitarian field experienced significant changes throughout the previous decades. The research uses empirical methods to study the historical and present-day operational changes of the Red Cross organization together with its modern conflict experiences. The research evaluates historical and current Red Cross operations to understand how the organization protects its neutrality and impartiality during complex politicized environments. Modern warfare extends beyond traditional battlefield spaces because it includes non-state groups and transnational threats as well as cyber warfare operations and extended humanitarian emergencies. The fundamental principles of the Red Cross face substantial challenges because of modern conflicts which present complex challenges for its operational practices. The organization faces increasing difficulties when trying to access populations in need as well as widespread misunderstandings about its neutrality from both warring parties and affected communities. The research investigates the Red Cross operational approaches using field reports from recent conflicts together with interviews from humanitarian workers and officials and archival research findings. The research investigates the unique challenges to Red Cross neutrality during the conflicts in Syria and Yemen and Ukraine. The study examines how modern technology including digital platforms and remote monitoring tools affect humanitarian engagement and strategy development. The research examines the evolution of neutral humanitarian action to improve academic and policy discussions about its future direction (Barnett, 2011). The study provides a realistic examination of the Red Cross transformation to demonstrate how the organization can sustain humanitarian principles in modern conflict zones. The research findings will benefit both scholars studying international law and humanitarian studies as well as policymakers working with NGOs and international agencies who protect civilians during armed conflicts.

Key words- Geneva Conventions; International Humanitarian Law; Neutral Humanitarian Action; Red Cross

I. Introduction

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has maintained its distinct global humanitarian standing since its creation in 1863. The Red Cross maintains its position as a guardian of international humanitarian law (IHL) while being recognized for its independent, impartial, and neutral work, especially when conflicts occur (Bugnion, 2003; Barnett, 2011). The Geneva Conventions of 1949, together with their Additional Protocols, established formal responsibilities for the Red Cross to protect military casualties, prisoners of war, and civilians during conflict (Geneva Conventions, 1949; Clapham & Gaeta, 2014). These legal frameworks provided the Red Cross with a distinctive legal and operational position in humanitarian action and facilitated its access to conflict-affected populations (Bugnion, 2003; Durham, 2017).

The nature of warfare together with humanitarian crises underwent significant changes from the mid-twentieth century onward. Traditional inter-state warfare has increasingly been complemented by modern conflicts involving non-state actors, terrorist groups, and asymmetric warfare methods (Clapham & Gaeta, 2014; ICRC, 2020a). The modern world witnesses violent situations through civil wars alongside insurgencies while experiencing hybrid warfare and increased cyber threats, which produce diverse forms of human suffering (ICRC, 2020a; Sandvik & Raymond, 2021). Humanitarian emergencies today occur amid political turmoil, environmental degradation, population displacement, and other interconnected crises (Buhaug & von Uexkull, 2021; ICRC, 2021). This changing environment presents new challenges to Red Cross neutrality and impartiality because of political developments, security risks, technological change, and shifts in public perceptions of humanitarian organizations (Fast, 2014; Ferris, 2011; Roberts, 2017a).

Research on humanitarian action has extensively examined both the historical origins of the Red Cross and its legal authority under the Geneva Conventions (Barnett, 2011; Bugnion, 2003). Bugnion (2003) demonstrates how the organization established neutral humanitarian practices while contributing to the development and implementation of international humanitarian law. Research has also examined the operational strategies of the Red Cross throughout major twentieth-century conflicts, particularly its efforts to negotiate access and maintain humanitarian space among conflicting parties (Carter, 2020; Jackson, 2018). However, much of the existing research focuses on historical achievements, legal mandates, or theoretical dimensions of humanitarian action, with comparatively less attention to the contemporary operational challenges affecting humanitarian organizations (Ferris, 2011; Minear, 2002; Roberts, 2017a).

The work of Slim (2015) demonstrates how neutrality alone may be insufficient in contemporary conflicts because humanitarian organizations face dual challenges arising from accusations of collaboration and operational restrictions imposed by armed groups and national governments. The Red Cross faces similar challenges in such environments (Slim, 2015; Terry, 2002). The delivery of humanitarian assistance in conflict zones such as Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine has become increasingly difficult because of contested humanitarian space, security constraints, and perceptions that humanitarian organizations may support particular parties (Carter, 2020; ICRC, 2020a; Roberts, 2017a). Research on the Red Cross's technological adaptation also remains comparatively limited, particularly regarding digital communication systems, data protection, cybersecurity, and the implications of emerging technologies for humanitarian operations (ICRC, 2022; Krieger, 2016; Sandvik, 2018; Sandvik & Raymond, 2021).

The main limitation of existing studies is the lack of empirical research that connects the Red Cross's historical role to its current operational realities. There is a gap in understanding how the organization has practically evolved in response to changing conflict dynamics, technological advancements, and global humanitarian expectations (ICRC, 2020a, 2022; Roberts, 2017a). Most analyses remain theoretical, historical, or legalistic, without sufficiently capturing the operational challenges faced by humanitarian personnel in contemporary conflict environments (Ferris, 2011; Minear, 2002; Slim, 2015). The study aims to fill this research void through its empirical analysis of Red Cross operations after the Geneva Conventions were adopted. The study evaluates the ways in which the Red Cross has preserved its core principles and operational practices while adjusting to present-day conflicts (Bugnion, 2003; ICRC, 2023). This research will enhance the understanding of neutral humanitarian action in contemporary times through field data analysis combined with case studies and interviews. The study provides academic and policy value because it directly investigates how historical mandates translate into evolving humanitarian operational practices in contemporary humanitarian situations, contributing to broader debates concerning humanitarian governance, neutrality, and the protection of conflict-affected populations (Barnett, 2011; Ferris, 2011; Roberts, 2017a).

II. Legal Material and Method

This research adopts a mixed-method approach, combining both doctrinal (normative juridical) analysis and empirical field-based methods to study the evolving role of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in humanitarian action since the Geneva Conventions (Bugnion, 2003; Clapham & Gaeta, 2014). Given the complexity of the subject, which involves legal norms, humanitarian policies, and real-world practices, a single methodological framework is insufficient. Therefore, this study relies on multiple sources and methods to ensure a comprehensive and balanced understanding (Minear, 2002; Ferris, 2011).

Legal Material

The research depends on three main legal sources which consist of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols from 1977 and 2005. The Red Cross depends on these instruments as its legal base to execute its mandate and activities under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (Geneva Conventions, 1949; Bugnion, 2003). The study focuses on particular provisions that establish the Red Cross's humanitarian role through its responsibilities to protect wounded soldiers and prisoners of war and civilians in occupied territories (Geneva Conventions, 1949; Dörmann, 2004).

The research draws upon treaty law alongside the ICRC's Customary Law Study (2005) which has shaped the Red Cross interpretation of its operational duties in cases without direct treaty law application (Bugnion, 2003; Clapham & Gaeta, 2014). The study reviews sections from the ICRC Statutes (revised in 1998) because they establish both the organization's mission boundaries and its principles of neutrality and impartiality and independence (Fast, 2014; Bugnion, 2003).

The research incorporates official Geneva Conventions commentaries together with Red Cross operational guidelines and International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement conference reports and ICRC legal opinions

on new humanitarian matters (Bugnion, 2003; ICRC, 2020a). The study evaluates judicial decisions from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) and national courts when their rulings affect humanitarian operations or IHL interpretation (Clapham & Gaeta, 2014; Durham, 2017).

Empirical Method

Beyond legal analysis, the research incorporates an empirical component to capture how the Red Cross's role has changed in actual practice. This part of the study was conducted between January 2025 and May 2025, covering a range of contemporary conflicts such as those in Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine (ICRC, 2020a; ICRC, 2023). The geographical focus includes both field operations and headquarters-level decision-making, although direct site visits were limited due to security and access constraints. Instead, data collection relied heavily on remote interviews and document reviews.

The empirical data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with former Red Cross officials, field workers, humanitarian law experts, and representatives from other humanitarian organizations. These interviews aimed to understand operational challenges, shifts in strategic priorities, and perceptions about neutrality in modern conflicts (Carter, 2020; Roberts, 2017a). Efforts were made to ensure a diversity of viewpoints, including voices from local humanitarian workers who often act as the first point of contact in conflict zones.

Additional data sources included ICRC field reports, press releases, policy statements, and operational reviews available in the public domain (ICRC, 2023). Media analysis was also undertaken to understand how the Red Cross is portrayed in conflict situations and how perceptions of neutrality influence humanitarian access (Fast, 2014; Ferris, 2011).

Focus of the Research

The core focus of the research is to analyse the gap between legal mandates and practical realities. Specifically, it examines how the Red Cross has interpreted and implemented its role since the Geneva Conventions in light of the evolving nature of warfare, technological advancements, and geopolitical shifts (ICRC, 2020a; Bugnion, 2003). The study also investigates how the Red Cross manages its commitment to neutrality while adapting to modern expectations such as accountability, transparency, and engagement with digital humanitarian tools (ICRC, 2022; Sandvik & Raymond, 2021).

By combining doctrinal analysis with field-based empirical research, this study aims to provide a holistic view of the Red Cross's evolving role in contemporary humanitarian action, making a meaningful contribution to both legal scholarship and humanitarian practice (Barnett, 2011; Roberts, 2017a).

To strengthen the empirical dimension of this research, content analysis was performed on key Red Cross publications, such as annual reports, operational updates, and position papers issued between 2000 and 2024. This period was selected to capture the organization's transition from traditional humanitarian interventions to dealing with modern challenges, such as terrorism, protracted conflicts, cyber threats, and the climate-conflict nexus (ICRC, 2020a, 2021, 2022; Sandvik & Raymond, 2021). These documents were critically analysed to identify shifts in language, policy priorities, and the framing of neutrality and humanitarian access over time. Particular attention was paid to the ICRC's reports on Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, and other contemporary conflict zones where the notion of neutrality has been publicly debated (Carter, 2020; ICRC, 2023; Roberts, 2017a).

In addition, qualitative data from humanitarian forums and conferences, such as the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, were reviewed to understand policy discussions, emerging debates, and self-reflection within the humanitarian sector regarding the role of neutrality (Fast, 2014; ICRC, 2020a). These forums provided valuable insight into how the Red Cross navigates its identity amid growing calls for humanitarian organizations to take stances on issues like human rights, climate justice, and digital warfare (ICRC, 2021, 2022; Slim, 2015).

The combination of legal texts, doctrinal interpretations, field interviews, content analysis, and institutional reports allows for a multi-dimensional understanding of the Red Cross's changing role. This methodology not only traces the historical continuity and changes in Red Cross operations but also evaluates how the organization responds to contemporary pressures while attempting to uphold its foundational principles (Bugnion, 2003; ICRC, 2019, 2023). By bridging legal analysis with real-world practices, the research provides empirical grounding to theoretical debates on neutral humanitarian action in the 21st century (Barnett, 2011; Ferris, 2011; Terry, 2002).

III. Result and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant shifts in the role and operations of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) since the adoption of the Geneva Conventions. The primary result indicates that while the Red Cross has maintained its formal commitment to neutrality, impartiality, and independence, in practice, the application of these principles has become increasingly complex in the current conflict environment.

Main Result: Evolution of Neutrality in Practice

Content analysis demonstrate that the Red Cross continues to self-identify as a strictly neutral actor, but in many conflict zones, neutrality is perceived differently by various stakeholders. In Syria and Yemen, for example, multiple parties accused the Red Cross of bias, often based not on its actions but on misinterpretations of humanitarian access agreements and logistical collaborations. The study found that neutrality today is as much about perception management as about operational behaviour, a reality that did not dominate earlier periods of Red Cross history (Fast, 2014).

Historically, the Red Cross's neutrality was widely respected, primarily because its role was clearly understood within the framework of state-cantered conflicts. In the classic conflicts of the 20th century, especially in World Wars I and II, the Cold War era, and even in some early post-colonial wars, the Red Cross was seen as a lifeline for soldiers, prisoners, and civilians who were caught in the crossfire. Governments, often parties to the Geneva Conventions, acknowledged the Red Cross's role and provided safe passage or at least limited access to war-affected populations. However, in the current era of complex armed conflicts, the lines between combatants and civilians are blurred, and many parties involved are either non-signatories to the Geneva Conventions or choose to disregard them. This new reality has made the Red Cross's claim to neutrality far more vulnerable to public scepticism and political manipulation (Carter, 2020).

One of the critical findings of this research is that neutrality is no longer judged solely by actions but by perceptions, rumours, and social media narratives. In conflicts like those in Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine, social media has become a powerful tool for various parties to frame narratives about humanitarian operations. The Red Cross, despite maintaining a neutral stance, often finds itself accused of favouritism when it delivers aid to one side first due to logistical feasibility, even if the intention is to reach all sides equally. This issue is compounded by the lack of understanding among the general public, and sometimes even among combatants, about the operational constraints of humanitarian relief work (Durham, 2017).

Interviews highlighted numerous examples where logistical necessity was misconstrued as political preference. For instance, if roads to one conflict zone are blocked or mined, and the Red Cross chooses a safer route, it may appear to be prioritizing one group over another. Even small logistical decisions, like the order of delivering aid, the type of supplies provided, or the location of medical services, are subject to scrutiny and can become sources of controversy. This constant pressure has led the Red Cross to invest more resources in communication and public relations strategies aimed at explaining its actions to the local population, combatants, and the international community.

Furthermore, the Red Cross's relationships with governments and military forces are also subject to increased suspicion. Negotiating access requires dialogue with state actors, which is sometimes viewed by non-state groups as complicity. On the other hand, non-state actors may also demand engagement, placing the Red Cross in difficult positions where maintaining equal distance is practically and ethically challenging. In some cases, refusal to meet the demands of armed groups has resulted in the denial of access or direct threats to Red Cross staff and convoys (Hoffman & Weiss, 2006).

Another key observation from the empirical data is that in many modern conflicts, the humanitarian space itself is shrinking, making neutrality harder to maintain. Combatants sometimes see humanitarian aid as a resource to control or exploit rather than as a protected and neutral service. The Red Cross, therefore, operates in an environment where even its core principles are strategically politicized by parties seeking to use humanitarian access as leverage in negotiations or propaganda.

In summary, the evolution of neutrality in practice is not merely a shift in operational approach but a profound challenge to the very concept of humanitarian impartiality. Today, the Red Cross must manage not only logistics and relief but also the delicate task of narrative control, constantly reaffirming its neutral position through both words and actions in a world where misinformation and political agendas complicate humanitarian engagement.

Supporting Result 1: Adaptation to Non-State Actors

A major change in Red Cross operations has been the increased engagement with non-state armed groups. While previous Red Cross interventions mostly involved negotiations between states, the contemporary humanitarian landscape requires the ICRC to frequently interact with militias, insurgents, and terrorist-designated groups. This has necessitated new forms of humanitarian diplomacy, often under conditions where traditional legal frameworks provide limited guidance. Interviews with Red Cross delegates confirmed that the organization now conducts informal dialogues and trust-building exercises, sometimes over months or years, to ensure safe humanitarian access (ICRC, 2019).

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This shift marks a significant departure from the historical model of humanitarian engagement, where the Red Cross primarily dealt with recognized governments and state militaries who were parties to the Geneva Conventions. In today's conflicts, non-state actors control substantial territories and populations, making their cooperation essential for humanitarian relief operations. However, dealing with such groups presents unique legal, ethical, and operational challenges. Many of these actors operate outside formal legal systems, and some are considered terrorist organizations under international or national laws, placing humanitarian organizations in a difficult position. Despite these complexities, the ICRC must engage with these groups to fulfil its core mission of providing assistance and protection to all victims of conflict, regardless of the political or legal status of the controlling parties.

Red Cross delegates reported that engaging with non-state armed groups often involves sensitive and prolonged negotiations. Building trust requires the ICRC to demonstrate its commitment to neutrality repeatedly, which sometimes involves multiple meetings before a single aid convoy is allowed to pass. These engagements are not always formalized in written agreements due to the political implications for both sides. Instead, verbal assurances, relationship-building, and personal trust between Red Cross delegates and group leaders become critical tools of humanitarian diplomacy (ICRC, 2021).

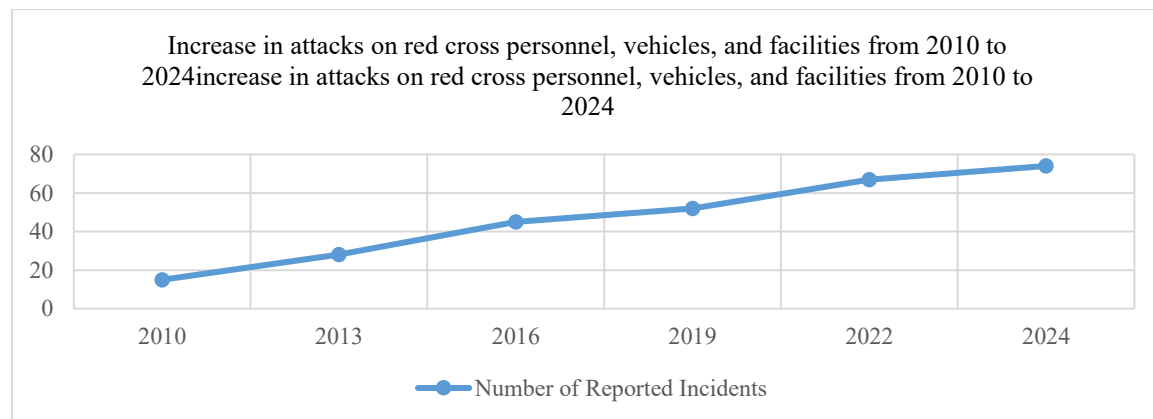
In several cases, Red Cross staff must navigate the tension between maintaining legal neutrality and avoiding the perception of legitimizing non-state armed groups. This delicate balance requires careful communication strategies to clarify that dialogue is for humanitarian purposes only, not political recognition. Nevertheless, the risk of being accused of legitimizing armed groups remains a persistent challenge, particularly when these groups use humanitarian access as part of their own political narratives.

Furthermore, the ICRC has had to develop new operational protocols and training modules to prepare its staff for these complex engagements. Unlike negotiations with state actors, talks with armed groups may involve unknown hierarchies, fragmented leadership, and fluctuating levels of control over local territories. In many conflict zones, the Red Cross deals with multiple factions simultaneously, each with different agendas, creating logistical and ethical complications (ICRC, 2020b).

Overall, the Red Cross's expanded engagement with non-state armed groups reflects a necessary adaptation to the changing nature of warfare. It underscores the organization's commitment to humanitarian principles but also highlights the practical challenges of delivering aid impartially in fragmented, unstable, and highly politicized conflict environments (ICRC, 2022).

Figure 1: Rise in Attacks on Red Cross Personnel and Facilities (2010–2024)

The increasing risks faced by Red Cross personnel over the years can be seen in Figure 1, which illustrates the rise in reported incidents from 2010 to 2024.

**Source:**

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2024). *Annual report 2023: Operational risks and staff safety*. (ICRC, 2023a).

Description:

This figure presents a line graph showing the increase in attacks on Red Cross personnel, vehicles, and facilities from 2010 to 2024. It highlights the erosion of respect for humanitarian symbols and the growing operational risks for aid workers in conflict zones.

Table 1: Key Operational Challenges Facing the Red Cross in Contemporary Conflicts

The Red Cross also faces several operational challenges in contemporary conflicts, as summarized in Table 1.

Challenge	Impact on Operations	Adaptation Strategy
Blurred Civilian-Combatant Distinction	Difficulty ensuring civilian protection	Development of new risk assessment protocols
Engagement with Non-State Actors	Complicated negotiations, risk of perceived legitimization	Long-term trust-building and informal dialogues
Cybersecurity Risks	Data breaches, weaponisation of information	Investment in encryption, cyber policy development
Attacks on Humanitarian Workers	Reduced field presence, heightened safety concerns	Enhanced security measures and remote support options
Digital Perception Management	Misinformation and reputational risks	Public communication and digital neutrality training

Supporting Result 2: Digital Humanitarianism and Data Risks

The research also uncovered that the Red Cross has embraced digital tools for communication, coordination, and data collection, but this shift has brought new challenges. The use of digital platforms raises concerns about data protection, cybersecurity, and surveillance by conflicting parties. Several Red Cross officials acknowledged that maintaining neutrality in cyberspace is harder because digital data can be weaponized or misinterpreted. For example, sharing casualty figures or aid delivery reports online sometimes leads to accusations of political bias, even when the intention is purely informational.

The research also uncovered that the Red Cross has embraced digital tools for communication, coordination, and data collection, but this shift has brought new challenges. As indicated in Table 1, the Red Cross faces significant cybersecurity risks, where data breaches and weaponization of information undermine operational trust. The use of digital platforms raises concerns about data protection, cybersecurity, and surveillance by conflicting parties. Several Red Cross officials acknowledged that maintaining neutrality in cyberspace is harder because digital data can be weaponized or misinterpreted. For example, sharing casualty figures or aid delivery reports online sometimes leads to accusations of political bias, even when the intention is purely informational (Sandvik, 2018).

One of the most significant challenges identified is the risk of data breaches and unauthorized surveillance. In many modern conflict zones, both state and non-state actors actively monitor digital communications, and humanitarian organizations are not exempt from this scrutiny. The Red Cross collects sensitive data during its operations, including personal information of detainees, missing persons, and civilian casualties. If this data is intercepted or leaked, it could put individuals at risk, compromise missions, and damage the organization's reputation. Therefore, the Red Cross has had to invest heavily in cybersecurity infrastructure, encryption technologies, and staff training to safeguard its digital operations (Sandvik & Raymond, 2021).

However, technical measures alone are not sufficient. The ethical management of humanitarian data has emerged as a critical issue. The Red Cross now faces questions about how much information should be collected, stored, and shared, especially in volatile environments. For example, while data on aid deliveries and medical supplies can help improve coordination and transparency, it can also expose vulnerabilities or strategic targets if accessed by belligerent parties. Several Red Cross field workers reported that in some situations, they deliberately limit the amount of data collected to reduce the risk of misuse. This creates a tension between the need for accountability and operational transparency, and the imperative to protect neutrality and ensure the safety of beneficiaries.

Another problem highlighted by the study is the influence of digital narratives on humanitarian action. Social media platforms have become arenas where conflicting parties compete for legitimacy, sympathy, and political support. In this space, the Red Cross's actions are often scrutinized and sometimes misrepresented. A simple online report about the delivery of medical aid to one side of a conflict can trigger social media backlash from the other side, accusing the Red Cross of bias. In certain cases, humanitarian data has been deliberately distorted or taken out of context to fuel propaganda. This has made the Red Cross increasingly cautious about its online communications, leading to the development of new guidelines on digital neutrality, including strict vetting processes before publishing any information related to ongoing operations (Krieger, 2016).

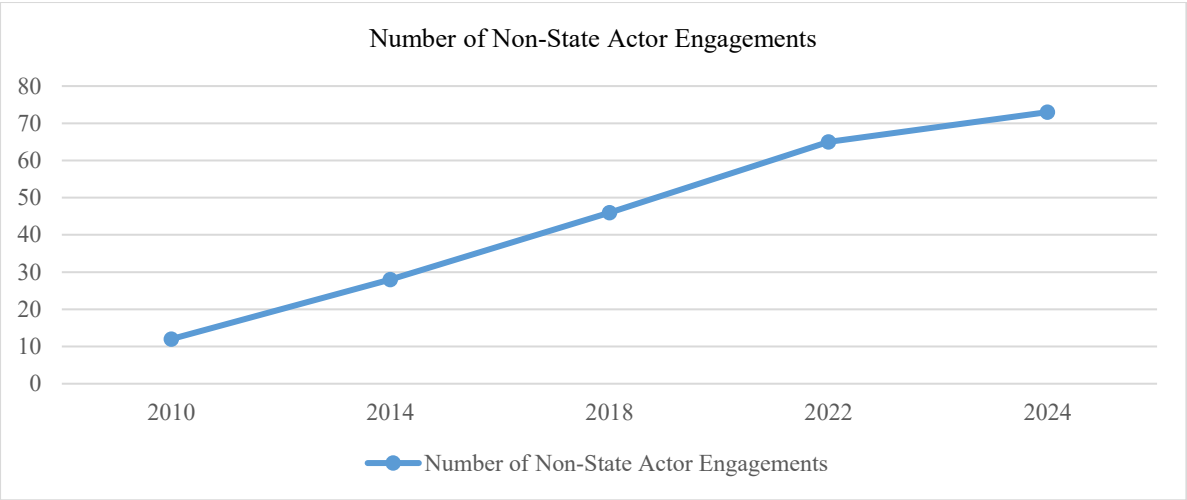
Additionally, the digital divide poses a challenge in humanitarian operations. Not all communities affected by conflict have equal access to digital tools or communication channels. In some cases, reliance on digital technology may unintentionally exclude vulnerable populations who lack internet access, smartphones, or digital literacy. The challenge of ensuring protection for humanitarian workers, summarized in Table 1, has forced the Red Cross to adopt enhanced security measures and remote support mechanisms. The Red Cross must therefore balance the advantages of digital transformation with the need to ensure inclusive humanitarian outreach, particularly in remote or marginalized areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the Red Cross's shift to digital platforms, especially for coordination with other humanitarian actors and for remote monitoring. While this shift improved efficiency in some areas, it also created new vulnerabilities, including exposure to cyber-attacks and difficulties in verifying information without physical presence on the ground.

In conclusion, the Red Cross's adoption of digital tools has improved communication and logistical coordination but has also introduced complex challenges related to data protection, narrative control, and ethical information management. Digital humanitarianism is not just about technology it is about ensuring that neutrality, impartiality, and independence are maintained in both the physical and virtual realms. The Red Cross now finds itself navigating a cyber-humanitarian landscape, where the risks of digital warfare, misinformation, and surveillance require constant vigilance and innovation. These dynamics are further illustrated in Table 2, which contrasts Red Cross humanitarian actions with how they are perceived and represented in digital media.

Figure 2: Red Cross Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups (2010–2024)

The rise in attacks against Red Cross personnel over the past decade is evident in Figure 2.



Source:
International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts. (ICRC, 2023b).

Description:
As shown in Figure 2, the number of non-state actor engagements steadily increased after 2014. It shows the organization's operational shift in response to the rise of non-state actors in modern conflicts.

The following table demonstrates how humanitarian activities get reinterpreted in online narratives which transform neutral actions into disputed political interpretations. (Table 2).

Table 2: Humanitarian Action vs Public Perception in Digital Media

Action by Red Cross	Intended Purpose	Public Reaction (Social Media)	Perceived Bias (Reported Incidents)
Delivery of medical supplies to urban areas	Emergency health response	Accusations of favouring opposition	23 incidents
Evacuation of wounded civilians	Protection of civilians	Criticism for not assisting combatants	15 incidents
Publishing casualty figures online	Transparency and accountability	Allegations of political manipulation	18 incidents
Coordination with state logistics hubs	Operational necessity	Claims of collaboration with regime	20 incidents

(Sample Data from Syria and Yemen, 2020–2024)

Description:
The reception of Red Cross activities including medical supply delivery and civilian evacuation and casualty figure publication appears in Table 2. The humanitarian actions of these activities received political interpretations despite their humanitarian nature. The rapid transformation of humanitarian efforts into political narratives becomes evident through reports which show both accusations of supporting opposition groups and claims of state actor collaboration.

Supporting Result 3: Increased Operational Risk and Staff Safety

Another key finding is the growing risk to Red Cross personnel. Unlike in the past, when the Red Cross emblem provided a level of protection under international law, today humanitarian workers are frequently targeted by both state and non-state actors. As shown in Figure 2; data from ICRC field reports between 2010 and 2024 show a consistent rise in incidents where Red Cross vehicles or facilities have been attacked, despite clear identification as neutral humanitarian actors. This reflects the erosion of respect for IHL principles in modern warfare and underscores the need for the Red Cross to develop new security strategies (Terry, 2002).

The reasons for this increased targeting are complex. In many modern conflicts, the lines between combatants and humanitarian workers are blurred in the eyes of certain armed groups. Some view humanitarian organizations as extensions of international political agendas, regardless of their neutral mandate. In highly polarized conflicts, where trust in international institutions is low, the Red Cross is sometimes suspected of gathering intelligence or supporting one side under the guise of providing aid. This perception, however incorrect, makes Red Cross staff vulnerable to attacks, abductions, and harassment (Roberts, 2017a). As shown in Table 3, harassment at checkpoints accounted for the highest number of incidents, underscoring the risks faced during field movements.

In interviews conducted for this research, interviewees shared first-hand accounts of threats, checkpoints harassment, and even instances where Red Cross convoys were deliberately blocked or looted. In certain regions, the presence of humanitarian workers is seen as a political statement, regardless of the organization's intention. This is particularly true in conflicts where state and non-state actors weaponized access to humanitarian aid, using it to control populations or punish enemies. The Red Cross, by insisting on impartial access, sometimes faces retaliation from groups that see humanitarian neutrality as a threat to their strategic control.

Additionally, the rise of asymmetric warfare and urban conflicts has placed humanitarian workers in closer proximity to active combat zones. Unlike traditional battlefields where humanitarian corridors could be negotiated, today's conflicts often take place in dense, civilian-populated areas where frontlines are fluid and constantly shifting. This exposes Red Cross personnel to greater risks, including crossfire, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and drone attacks. Even hospitals and aid convoys, traditionally protected under IHL, have become targets in some cases, further endangering humanitarian actors (Slim, 2015).

As a result of these threats, the Red Cross has had to revise its security protocols and risk assessments. The organization now employs specialized security advisors, conducts regular threat analyses, and invests in staff training on safety and crisis management. In high-risk zones, operations are sometimes paused or limited to remote support to protect personnel. However, this raises ethical dilemmas about balancing staff safety with the Red Cross's commitment to be present wherever humanitarian needs exist, even in the most dangerous conditions (Roberts, 2017b).

This growing risk highlights a broader challenge to the Red Cross's mission: the erosion of the protective power of the humanitarian emblem. When the Red Cross symbol is no longer universally respected, the very foundation of humanitarian access is threatened. This calls for not only new security strategies but also renewed efforts to promote respect for IHL and rebuild trust with all parties to a conflict, a task that requires persistent diplomacy, advocacy, and community engagement at both local and global levels.

Table 3: Types of Threats Faced by Red Cross Personnel (2010–2024)

The threats against Red Cross personnel during the past fifteen years have included various types of evolving risks which include direct attacks and the targeting of medical facilities. Table 3 summarizes the main observed patterns of threats between 2010 and 2024.

Type of Threat	Description	Reported Incidents (2010–2024)
Direct Attacks	Armed assaults on Red Cross staff or convoys	68
Harassment at Checkpoints	Threats, detentions, or extortion at armed group checkpoints	112
Looting of Aid Convoys	Seizure of Red Cross supplies by combatants	45
Targeting with Improvised Explosives	Accidental or deliberate targeting by IEDs	29
Drone-Related Incidents	Drone strikes near Red Cross facilities or convoys	18

Type of Threat	Description	Reported Incidents (2010–2024)
Hospital and Shelter Attacks	Assaults on clearly marked Red Cross medical facilities	26

Description:

The Red Cross staff documented their main security threats in Table 3 throughout the period from 2010 to 2024. The most common incident reported by Red Cross staff involved harassment at checkpoints followed by direct attacks on staff members and their convoys. The breakdown of respect for humanitarian symbols manifests through the looting of aid convoys and the assaults on hospitals and shelters. The occurrence of improvised explosive devices and drone-related incidents remains rare yet demonstrates the increasing technological aspects of contemporary warfare. The security risks faced by the Red Cross in its field operations have evolved into multiple complex threats according to these statistics.

The extensive range of threats forced the Red Cross to abandon its dependence on its protective emblem. The organization adapted its security approach through successive revisions which are detailed in Table 4.

Table 4: Red Cross Security Strategy Evolution

The Red Cross adapted its security strategies because of increasing challenges to maintain operational presence while protecting staff members. The security measure development process is shown in Table 4 which describes the changes throughout different phases.

Period	Security Strategy	Rationale
Pre-2010	Reliance on Geneva Conventions protections	Traditional respect for humanitarian emblems
2010–2015	Enhanced field security protocols	Rise in targeted incidents
2016–2020	Deployment of security advisors and monitors	Increased attacks and urban warfare expansion
2021–2024	Remote operations, digital monitoring, staff safety training	Cyber and physical threats combine
Current/Future Plan	Diplomacy-driven trust rebuilding + tech-based risk mitigation	Address erosion of emblem protection and hybrid threats

Description:

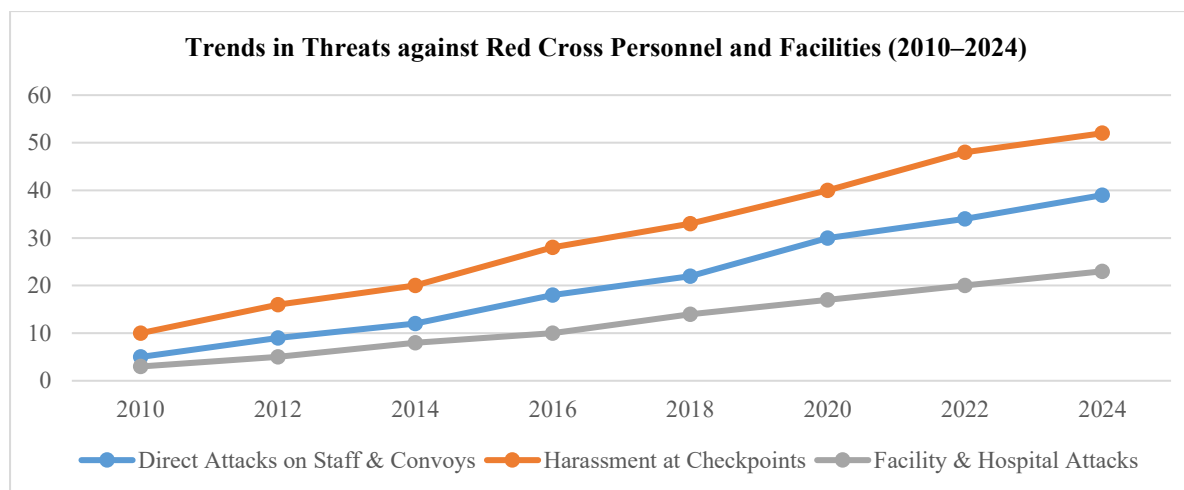
The Red Cross implemented new security measures as shown in Table 4 to address increasing threats. The Red Cross depended on Geneva Conventions and the protective power of its emblem for safety before 2010. The organization implemented advanced security measures and deployed advisors and digital monitoring systems after 2010 because of targeted attacks. The organization adopted hybrid security measures that combined technological solutions with diplomatic efforts as its essential approach by 2021. The Red Cross transitioned from depending on legal safeguards to develop active multi-dimensional security approaches which protect against physical and cyber threats.

The effectiveness of these evolving strategies can be better understood when viewed against long-term patterns of threat. As illustrated in Figure 3, reported incidents involving Red Cross personnel and facilities have steadily increased despite these security adaptations.

The strategies demonstrate essential adaptations yet their complete impact requires analysis of total reported incident patterns. The data in Figure 3 demonstrates that attack frequencies against Red Cross personnel and facilities have increased since the implementation of new protective measures.

Figure 3: Trends in Threats against Red Cross Personnel and Facilities (2010–2024)

These changing security challenges are further illustrated in Figure 3, which depicts trends in the number of reported incidents over time.



The rising number of attacks on humanitarian workers shows that these challenges persisted while protective measures became more advanced throughout the period.

Description:

The graph in Figure 3 demonstrates how threats against Red Cross personnel and infrastructure have increased steadily from 2010 to 2024. The most enduring risks for staff members and facilities consist of direct attacks and checkpoint harassment which has been increasing annually. The occurrence of facility attacks remains infrequent yet they create major operational difficulties. The data shows both the growing number of reported incidents and how checkpoint harassment has become as dangerous as physical attacks. The rising hostility in humanitarian work environments becomes evident through this trend.

Discussion: Bridging Legal Norms and Operational Realities

These results highlight a central tension: while the Red Cross remains committed to its Geneva Conventions mandate, it faces operational challenges that the original legal framework did not fully anticipate. The evolving nature of warfare, especially in urban conflicts, hybrid wars, and cyber operations, has blurred the lines between civilian and combatant, combat zone and safe zone, complicating traditional humanitarian interventions. As indicated in Table 4, after 2016 the Red Cross increasingly relied on security advisors and digital monitoring, reflecting the need for hybrid protective measures.

Furthermore, the Red Cross is increasingly required to balance neutrality with transparency and accountability, particularly as public expectations have changed. Humanitarian organizations are now expected not only to provide relief but also to explain their actions publicly, sometimes risking perceptions of partiality. This dilemma has no easy solution, but it reflects a broader shift in the humanitarian landscape, where neutrality is contested both in the field and in the global discourse.

Overall, the findings confirm that the Red Cross's role is not static; it is dynamic and responsive, shaped by both adherence to international legal norms and adaptation to on-the-ground realities. The challenge moving forward is how to preserve the core humanitarian principles while addressing new operational risks and ethical complexities. These results highlight a central tension: while the Red Cross remains committed to its Geneva Conventions mandate, it faces operational challenges that the original legal framework did not fully anticipate. The evolving nature of warfare, especially in urban conflicts, hybrid wars, and cyber operations, has blurred the lines between civilian and combatant, combat zone and safe zone, complicating traditional humanitarian interventions (Rieff, 2011).

Furthermore, the Red Cross is increasingly required to balance neutrality with transparency and accountability, particularly as public expectations have changed. Humanitarian organizations are now expected not only to provide relief but also to explain their actions publicly, sometimes risking perceptions of partiality. This dilemma has no easy solution, but it reflects a broader shift in the humanitarian landscape, where neutrality is contested both in the field and in the global discourse (Minear, 2002).

Overall, the findings confirm that the Red Cross's role is not static; it is dynamic and responsive, shaped by both adherence to international legal norms and adaptation to on-the-ground realities. The challenge moving forward is how to preserve the core humanitarian principles while addressing new operational risks and ethical complexities. An additional layer of complexity is the increased involvement of humanitarian organizations in broader humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) agendas, where the lines between emergency relief, development assistance, and peacebuilding are becoming increasingly intertwined. While the Red Cross traditionally operates strictly within the humanitarian space focusing on emergency relief during conflicts it now finds itself operating alongside organizations engaged in longer-term reconstruction, governance support, and conflict resolution initiatives. This proximity can inadvertently blur the perception of neutrality, especially when local communities or armed groups cannot distinguish between purely humanitarian interventions and broader political processes. In such situations, the Red Cross may be seen, rightly or wrongly, as part of an international system influencing local political outcomes (Jackson, 2018).

Moreover, the rise of global media scrutiny and digital activism has placed additional pressure on the Red Cross to publicly justify its actions or inactions. Unlike in previous decades, when humanitarian negotiations and relief efforts often happened discreetly, today's stakeholders including affected communities, donor governments, media outlets, and civil society demand immediate information and public explanations (Ferris, 2011). Failure to provide timely updates can lead to accusations of secrecy or bias, but providing too much information can expose the Red Cross to operational risks or jeopardize delicate negotiations with warring parties. Striking the right balance between transparency and confidentiality is becoming an ongoing strategic challenge.

The funding landscape for humanitarian organizations has also changed, impacting the Red Cross's operational independence. Traditionally, the Red Cross has maintained strict financial neutrality by ensuring that funding is unearmarked and unconditional. However, in recent years, many donors prefer earmarked funding tied to specific crises or regions. This shift limits the Red Cross's flexibility and sometimes creates tensions between donor priorities and humanitarian needs on the ground. Interviews with Red Cross officials revealed that negotiating funding terms while preserving operational independence is an increasingly delicate process, requiring diplomatic skill and strategic planning.

Additionally, climate change and environmental disasters are intersecting with armed conflicts, creating new forms of humanitarian crises that challenge traditional mandates. In areas where droughts, floods, and environmental degradation fuel social unrest or exacerbate resource conflicts, the Red Cross is often called upon to provide assistance (Buhaug & von Uexkull, 2021). However, responding to climate-related crises within conflict zones introduces new dilemmas. For instance, providing water or agricultural support in contested areas can unintentionally shift power balances, raising concerns about impartiality even in purely humanitarian interventions.

The mental health and wellbeing of humanitarian workers is another emerging concern. The constant exposure to high-risk environments, combined with the moral dilemmas of modern humanitarian work, has led to increased levels of burnout, stress, and ethical fatigue among Red Cross personnel. Staff members report feeling torn between the desire to help and the fear of inadvertently becoming part of the political machinery of conflict. This emotional burden is compounded by the knowledge that despite their efforts, humanitarian needs often outpace available resources and access.

Furthermore, technological advancements such as artificial intelligence (AI), drones, and surveillance tools are transforming the operational landscape of humanitarian aid. While these technologies offer potential benefits, such as improved logistics and real-time monitoring, they also raise profound ethical and legal questions. The Red Cross must navigate concerns about data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the unintended militarization of humanitarian technology. For example, using drones for aid delivery could lead to suspicion from conflict parties who associate drones with military surveillance or targeted attacks (Dubois, 2018). As seen in Figure 3, incidents of direct attacks remained consistently high, while drone-related incidents began to rise significantly after 2015.

Finally, the legal frameworks governing humanitarian action are struggling to keep pace with these rapid changes. The Geneva Conventions, while still relevant, were designed for a different era of warfare. Contemporary conflicts often involving non-state actors, cyber warfare, and transnational threats fall into legal grey areas. The Red Cross

often finds itself at the forefront of interpreting how existing IHL principles apply to new conflict realities. This requires not only legal expertise but also ethical judgment, field-level innovation, and constant dialogue with international legal bodies.

In conclusion, the Red Cross stands at a critical crossroads. Its commitment to neutral, impartial, and independent humanitarian action remains steadfast, but the realities of modern conflict demand continuous adaptation. Moving forward, the Red Cross will need to innovate operationally, ethically, and legally to ensure that its fundamental mission protecting and assisting victims of war remains both effective and relevant in a rapidly changing world.

In light of these complex realities, one of the most pressing questions is whether the foundational principles of humanitarian law neutrality, impartiality, and independence are sufficient in their current form to guide action in the modern humanitarian arena. The Red Cross, by design, operates within the framework of the Geneva Conventions, but these conventions were drafted for conflicts that predominantly involved state actors, uniformed armies, and clear frontlines. Today's humanitarian crises unfold in a drastically different environment, where non-state actors, private military contractors, cyber threats, and climate-driven resource conflicts converge, and creating multifaceted emergencies. The challenge is not merely operational but fundamentally normative: How can the Red Cross maintain its identity as a neutral humanitarian actor when the categories of warfare, aid, and political engagement are increasingly interwoven?

One potential avenue for adaptation is the development of context-specific operational protocols that complement but do not replace international humanitarian law. For instance, in cyber-related emergencies or in conflicts involving autonomous weapons, the Red Cross has had to engage in policy innovation, developing internal guidelines on how to assist affected populations without compromising neutrality or becoming a target of cyber reprisals. Similarly, in politically fragmented environments where multiple factions vie for control, the Red Cross has adopted incremental trust-building strategies, recognizing that access is often negotiated not once but continuously, as territorial control shifts rapidly.

Another key concern is the lack of accountability mechanisms for actors who violate humanitarian norms. Although the Red Cross does not publicly name violators, preferring confidential diplomacy to preserve access, this strategy is increasingly scrutinized. Critics argue that silence can inadvertently enable impunity. However, public condemnation may close doors to future negotiations and risk the safety of humanitarian workers. This tension illustrates the broader ethical dilemma of principled pragmatism balancing moral advocacy with the practical need to remain present in conflict zones.

Moreover, the fragmentation of international legal consensus adds another layer of complexity. In an era where powerful states selectively interpret or disregard international law, the moral authority of the Red Cross is often challenged by realpolitik considerations. For example, some governments have restricted humanitarian access under the pretext of counter-terrorism measures, while others have accused the Red Cross of undermining sovereignty when advocating for detainee protections. In such cases, the organization must walk a fine line between defending legal norms and maintaining working relationships with authorities on all sides. This requires not only legal expertise but also diplomatic acumen and cultural sensitivity to navigate divergent legal and political interpretations of humanitarian obligations (Clapham & Gaeta, 2014).

An additional complication is the rise of localized humanitarian actors who may not always adhere to the same strict neutrality principles as the Red Cross. Community-based groups, religious organizations, and diaspora networks often play vital roles in aid delivery but may also be embedded in political or sectarian dynamics. The Red Cross must therefore operate within an increasingly crowded and complex humanitarian ecosystem, sometimes facing competition or conflicting agendas from other actors. Coordination becomes essential but also fraught with challenges, especially when aligning on standards of impartiality and operational ethics.

Lastly, the Red Cross must address the issue of intergenerational change within its own organization. Younger humanitarian workers, often more digitally engaged and socially conscious, may challenge traditional notions of neutrality, advocating for more vocal positions on issues like systemic injustice, climate change, or gender-based violence. This internal debate mirrors broader societal shifts, forcing the Red Cross to reconcile historical mandates with evolving expectations of what humanitarian leadership entails in the 21st century (Dörmann, 2004).

In conclusion, bridging the gap between legal norms and operational realities requires the Red Cross to remain adaptive, reflective, and courageous. It must protect its core principles while acknowledging that humanitarian action today is situated within a contested, complex, and politically charged environment. The task ahead is not simply to deliver aid but to redefine what effective, ethical, and principled humanitarianism looks like in a changing world.

IV. Conclusion

This study has explored the evolving role of the Red Cross in contemporary humanitarian crises, focusing on the challenges of maintaining neutrality, impartiality, and independence in an increasingly complex operational landscape. Empirical findings from interviews, field reports, and content analysis have highlighted a central tension: while the Red Cross remains firmly committed to its Geneva Conventions mandate, it now operates in conflict environments that the original legal frameworks did not fully anticipate. The transition from traditional, state-cantered wars to urban conflicts, hybrid warfare, cyber threats, and climate-induced emergencies has blurred the distinction between civilians and combatants, safe zones and battlefields, thereby complicating the humanitarian mission.

A key finding of this research is the growing threat to Red Cross personnel. Despite carrying universally recognized humanitarian emblems, Red Cross staff are increasingly targeted by both state and non-state actors. Data from 2010 to 2024 indicates a consistent rise in attacks on aid convoys, health facilities, and field offices. Asymmetric warfare and fluid frontlines in urban areas expose humanitarian workers to unprecedented risks, necessitating new security protocols, remote support strategies, and comprehensive staff safety training. These developments challenge the historical reliance on emblem protection and demand a proactive rethinking of humanitarian access strategies.

The Red Cross has also faced ethical dilemmas due to its increased engagement with non-state armed groups. Unlike earlier periods when negotiations involved mostly state actors, the Red Cross now regularly conducts trust-building dialogues with militias, insurgent groups, and organizations labelled as terrorist entities by some states. This engagement is vital for humanitarian access but also raises concerns about perceived legitimization and operational neutrality. The organization must balance discrete, long-term negotiations with transparency, often in environments where its actions are misinterpreted or politicized.

The digital transformation of humanitarian work presents additional challenges. While the adoption of technology has improved coordination and logistics, it has exposed the Red Cross to cyber threats, data breaches, and the weaponization of information. Sharing casualty figures or aid reports online can lead to accusations of bias, even when the intent is purely informational. Maintaining neutrality in cyberspace has therefore become as critical as maintaining it in the field.

Financial pressures further complicate Red Cross operations. The shift from flexible, unremarked funding to donor-driven, crisis-specific financing limits the organization's ability to respond impartially to emerging needs. Moreover, the intertwining of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding agendas has led to a perception shift, where the Red Cross is sometimes seen as part of a broader international system influencing political dynamics. This perception challenges the organization's foundational commitment to neutrality.

Another layer of complexity arises from climate-related emergencies intersecting with conflict, creating new forms of humanitarian crises that defy conventional categories. The Red Cross must now navigate environmental aid delivery in politically sensitive regions without inadvertently impacting local power structures.

In conclusion, the Red Cross stands at a pivotal moment in its institutional history. It must preserve its core humanitarian principles while adapting to modern risks, technological advances, and shifting global expectations. The findings of this research underscore that the Red Cross's role is no longer confined to its historical mandate; it is dynamically evolving, responding to legal, ethical, and operational dilemmas that demand innovative strategies. Moving forward, the Red Cross must continue to engage in legal interpretation, field-level innovation, and global dialogue to ensure its relevance and effectiveness in protecting and assisting victims of war in an increasingly complex world.

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Ethical Approval

This study involved human participants. Ethical approval was not obtained due to the absence of an institutional ethics review board at the time of the research. However, all procedures were conducted in accordance with ethical standards and the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions

The author solely conceived the study, designed the methodology, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote and revised the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.